



James Weldon Johnson: Songwriter

Don Cusic

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As a songwriter, James Weldon Johnson is best known for “Life Every Voice,” which he wrote with his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson. However, during the early 1900s he was part of one of the most popular and successful songwriting teams in America. Johnson, along with his brother, Rosamond, and Bob Cole wrote hit songs for musicals during the ragtime era, 1895-1910. Later, he became one of the most prominent African-Americans in the United States before World War II. He was a diplomat, the author of a novel (The Autobiography of a Colored Man), poet (“God’s Trombones”), Civil Rights leader (the first black Executive Secretary of the NAACP), an active member of the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s and a distinguished Professor at Fisk University. Most of James Weldon Johnson’s songs have not been heard for over a hundred years because he wrote during the era of sheet music. Now, for the first time, here is a collection of Johnson’s lyrics and an extended biographical essay on him as a songwriter. Don Cusic is Professor of Music Business at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee and the author of 25 books. Cusic and Mike Curb produced a double album containing 30 of James Weldon Johnson’s songs, recorded by Melinda Doolittle, for Curb Records.

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